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RUEHHE/AMEMBASSY HELSINKI 0970
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 3705
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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS, INR/EAP

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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DISCUSSION TOUCHES HOT ISSUES

REFERENCES: A. (09) Jakarta 1908
 1B. (09) Jakarta 1863

1. (U) SUMMARY. ConGen Medan hosted 20 prominent Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist and other North Sumatra civil society leaders at his residence on January 15 in joint commemoration of Religious Freedom Day and Martin Luther King Day, to compare religious freedom and inter-ethnic tolerance in the U.S. and Indonesia. The discussion focused almost entirely on two of Indonesia's most sensitive religious freedom issues: restrictions on the Islamic sect Ahmadiyyah and a controversial law requiring community support in order to establish new houses of worship. The animated discussion came to an amicable consensus that the only way to deal with these types of religious controversies is through a heightened consciousness of tolerance. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) A group of 20 prominent civil society leaders representing Indonesia's major religions gathered for two hours at the ConGen residence on January 15 in joint commemoration of Religious Freedom Day and Martin Luther King Day. Guests included representatives of the five major religions from the Forum for Religious Harmony, as well as clergy, scholars, women leaders, and the media.

HOT BUTTON ISSUES RAISED

3. (U) The head of the Coordination Body for Women's Organizations began the discussion by defending two of Indonesia's controversial actions restricting religious freedom. One restricted the activities of the Islamic sect Ahmadiyyah. The decree on Ahmadiyyah restricted such activities as proselytizing. The other action is a law requiring community support in order to establish new houses of worship. This has hindered small Christian communities from worshipping in homes or opening up churches where their populations are small.

4. (U) ConGen explained why both issues infringe on freedom of religion and the how the U.S. Constitution protects such rights, including the rights of Muslims. Christians, Buddhists and Hindus then presented in-depth constitutional and theological reasons for why the houses of worship law violated both the spirit of Indonesian law and the Koran. One Protestant leader stated that in Indonesia there are too many local laws concerning religion and not enough action by the Central Government to protect religious rights embedded in the Constitution. Muslim leaders, including one of the provinces most respected theological scholars, basically agreed. Muslim and non-Muslim guests alike criticized zealots who have erected barriers between religions which did not exist before.

5. (U) After a lively but civil discussion, the group came to a consensus that the solution to such inter-religious disputes lay in teaching young people tolerance and understanding from an early age. They cited the U.S. as an example. One Muslim scholar who had traveled to the U.S. on an IVLP noted that contrary to

preconceptions that the U.S. discriminates against Muslims, he observed only tolerance. He recounted observing a long Muslim-American parade through the main streets of one city which proceeded without incident.

¶6. (U) This discussion was notable in that it calmly addressed issues which have led to heated differences of opinion and violence. The consensus among Muslims and followers of other faiths was indicative of North Sumatra's proclivity for people of different faiths and religions to try to get along. North Sumatra has major populations of Muslims, Protestants, Buddhists and Hindus and a diverse ethnic composition, which has contributed to tolerant attitudes in the interest of harmony.

HUME